

## **A MIRACLE STORY IN THREE PARTS**

Acts 3:1-16

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Today is two weeks after Easter. Two weeks ago we talked about how - though we all want desperately to return to so much of the life we have missed - the Easter story calls us to believe that our lives can be so much better than normal. Our lives can be extraordinary, and if we allow ourselves to be transformed by God's life-giving spirit, we can help our world to become extraordinary too. We are still in the Easter season, in the church.

And we are also in the season of preparation for a return to in-person worship. Six weeks from today, it is our plan and our hope that we will be together again on Sunday morning in our sanctuary. For the next several weeks we will be talking about the words "intention" and "purpose," as we consider carefully these questions, "What kind of church do we want to return to?" "What kind of church does our world need us to be?" Our world has changed. How will we embody the good news in a post-pandemic world?

I received an email from a parishioner on Wednesday night that said, "I am so excited and full of joy for the next season of life in our church!"

We are turning for guidance in these weeks to our ancestors in the faith community, to the stories told about the first days of the church in the book of Acts. The church in the time of Acts is growing rapidly. The disciples are enthusiastic about changing the world around them, just the way Jesus changed their lives. And all of this is happening under the shadow of the oppressive Roman regime. The crucifixion of

Jesus did not quench their thirst or satisfy their ravenous appetite to wipe out anyone who might be a threat. The followers of Jesus are in real physical danger, yet they continue to be the church.

As our passage for today begins, we are reminded that the disciples of Jesus, who are now part of a new organism called the church, are also still faithful Jews. Peter and John are going to the temple for the 3 PM prayer service. Regular worship at the temple is part of their spiritual practice; it's life-giving for them. **We** think of a division between Christianity and Judaism. It's interesting to read this passage and remember and realize the first disciples were faithful, practicing Jews. They received the strength and encouragement they needed to withstand the persecution by attending worship in the temple!

As they arrive at the temple, a man is being carried in, and he's placed right at the entrance to the temple, so that if you were going into worship, you'd have to step over him. This man is unable to walk. He is "crippled from birth", according to Acts. He has no way to make money other than to beg. He sees Peter and John approaching, and he's just about to ask them for money. Meanwhile, Peter and John see him. In an instant, they remember all of the times they were with Jesus. The scenes flash before their eyes. Jesus, healing the man who was born blind; Jesus, healing the paralyzed man - his friends dropping him down on a stretcher in front of Jesus; Jesus healing the leper and the man with a withered hand...they remember that Jesus ignored no one in need.

Peter and John don't have to decide what to do. They just act. Peter says to the man, "Look at us." The man looks, from one to the other. He sees two pairs of eyes,

two faces. This is the first act in this miracle story. These three men look at each other. Their eyes connect; their lives connect. The man is already given a gift. He is seen.

But that's not enough, not when you're desperately poor, not when you're fighting for survival. What the man is hoping for is that Peter and John will give him some money. He wants to buy enough food so that he doesn't go to bed hungry tonight. But Peter says, "I don't have any money, but I will give you what I do have. In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" Notice what Peter doesn't say. He doesn't say to the man, "Are you a Christian?" or "Do you deserve to be healed?" Everyone deserves healing. There are no prerequisites, just as there were not with Jesus.

This is act two. Picture the scene. Peter grasps the man's right hand and raises him up. At once, his feet and ankles become strong. He jumps up and begins to walk around. In this moment, inexplicable hurt has encountered the faithful witness of the risen Christ. In this moment, Peter and John have shown anyone who was paying attention that now, at the beginning of this Jesus movement, people will be seen: fully, strongly, clearly.

Here's what we know about people with disabilities in this time and place. Because there was no way to understand genetics and biology, it was assumed that if you had a disability, it was the result of sin - either yours, or - in the case of this man, who was born unable to walk - the result of the sins of his parents. So if you had an illness, mental or physical, or any kind of disability, you were ostracized. You were not allowed in the temple to worship. This man must have had some friends, at least, because someone carried him to the entrance of the temple every day. But he hadn't worshiped there. Ever.

Here's Act 3. The man walks into the temple, along with John and Peter. And now picture this. The man does three things when he first enters the temple: he walks, he leaps, and he praises God. He leaps. He jumps for joy. He is healed, and because he is healed of his physical ailments, he can re-enter the community. Once he was outside, begging; now he is inside, dancing. He is restored, he belongs. Spiritually healed now. Emotionally healed. He is whole.

St. Francis is a psychiatric residential treatment facility for children who have experienced severe trauma. One day a 17-year-old named Daniel was referred to St. Francis. Their team evaluated Daniel for admission and concluded that he was functioning at the level of a six-month child. He had severe intellectual deficiencies and was unable to speak. Because of the kind of neglect, he experienced growing up, Daniel had never been to a doctor, and had never received any dental care. It was also reported that Daniel only slept a few hours each week, which contributed to him being easily over stimulated and stressed. He required assistance with everything, including bathing and brushing his teeth. He also needed help eating, because Daniel still did not know how to use utensils.

Daniel had been in the custody of his grandmother, but because of her mental health issues, she had not provided adequate care for him. She had been able to evade authorities and the school system by literally hiding Daniel away, locking him in basements and closets. When his case was presented to Saint Francis, there was concern about whether the team was equipped to provide the kind of care that someone as traumatized as Daniel would need. But the executive director of the facility said that after reading just the first three paragraphs of the report he knew immediately that they

needed to admit Daniel. He reminded the staff that their work is centered on unconditional love and their job is to be an instrument of healing. The decision was made for Daniel to be admitted and the process of healing began.

Daniel began to receive one-on-one care. He was sent to a doctor and a dentist for the first time in his life. The staff began teaching him how to eat properly, how to care for himself, and how to sleep through the night. Slowly, but steadily, Daniel began to heal, and develop to his full potential. St. Francis didn't change his IQ but the love that the St. Francis staff showed brought peace and wholeness to Daniel's life.

Acts tells us that all of the people who observe the miracle at the temple are stunned, completely amazed. Peter sees how they are reacting; he sees this as a teaching moment. Full of passion for the life he is experiencing himself - and wanting that for other people - he says to them, "Why are you surprised? Don't look at me and John like we're some sort of magicians. This isn't magic. This is the power of the resurrection right in front of your eyes. The spirit of Jesus is alive. The risen Christ has overcome the effects of violence and the pull of death. God heals, restores, and gives life. This is what we've been talking about. This is what Jesus was all about! When are you going to join our movement, be a part of this good news? When are you going to join the people who are healed, the people who are leaping for joy?"

Our passage ends with a question. If this is a play, it ends with the audience not knowing what will happen next. Will this miracle have a fourth act? Will Peter's impassioned speech cause more people to join the Jesus movement? To center their lives around God in a new way?

The real question is - what does this story do for us? Will it inspire us to look more people in the eye, spend time with them, listen to their stories, offer them compassion? Will we use our resources to help bring more healing and inclusion into the world?

When things are shattered and broken by sudden violence and death; when lives and families fall apart because of poverty, addiction and trauma; when children have to be removed from their homes; when our religious and political structures seem polarized beyond repair; we, the people who follow Jesus, have something holy, unique, and much needed that we can offer. As Bishop Michael Curry writes, *being a Christian is not essentially about joining a church or being a nice person, but about following in the footsteps of Jesus, taking his teachings seriously, letting the Spirit of the risen Christ take the lead in our lives.*

*May it be so. Amen.*

Source used in this sermon: "To Move, To Touch, To Heal", by the Rev. David Hodges.